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Scenes: Tyrant Books

American Book Review, Volume 32, Number 4, May/June 2011, p. 31 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2011.0073>



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### Would you briefly describe Tyrant Books' history?

I've told this story before, but I will attempt here to make it more complete. The name, *New York Tyrant*, came to me a few years ago while vacationing in southern Italy. I'd been drinking since the early morning (switching between prosecco and pernod), and I was walking through the countryside of a small town called Suso. Though the sun was out, the sky began to rain and hail. I walked to the closest shelter, an abandoned farmhouse. The only thing I wanted in the whole world was to be able to keep drinking, to sit in that farmhouse and keep drinking and watch that rain and hail come down with the sun. Unfortunately, I'd finished my last bottle of wine just minutes earlier down the road. I searched the farmhouse I was in and miraculously found a bottle of red wine in the corner under some newspapers. The bottle was in a little crate stuffed with straw as its nest, and I remember singing, "Just like the little baby Jesus. He's here to suffer, and He's here to save." The label on the bottle of wine was in Latin. I don't read Latin. Since I had no corkscrew on my person, I'd opened the previous bottle by knocking on a stranger's door. An elderly lady invited me in and politely opened the bottle for me. I asked her to join me in a glass, but she declined with many pardons. Now in the farmhouse without a corkscrew, or even a paperclip (a trick I know), I had no choice but to break the neck off against one of the farmhouse's stone walls and drink from the jagged glass hole by tilting my head back and pouring it down my throat without touching my lips to the bottle's dangerous mouth. I am quite certain a few shards of glass entered me. I watched the hail, and I drank from the neck. I looked up at the sun behind the hail, and I drank. I finished the bottle and soon passed out on the farmhouse's dirt floor. In my drunken sleep, I dreamt of the words *New York Tyrant* written in the same font as the Latin on the wine bottle's label. Then, still in the dream, the words brightened and then lit up like a firework display, just like the words *Dirk Diggler* lit up for Mark Wahlberg's character in *Boogie Nights* (1997). When I woke, the rain and hail had stopped, and there was nothing but blue skies and the sun and wet fields of grass specked with hail. I remembered my dream and looked around for the bottle. I couldn't find the bottle anywhere. I looked out of one of the farmhouse windows and saw a man with bushy white hair walking away from where I was. I tried to call out to him, but instead of my voice leaving my mouth, some vomit did. Anyway, I couldn't imagine he would have come in to steal an empty broken bottle. So the sun came down, and I walked home with the name *New York Tyrant* stuck in my mouth like a new tooth.

Starting the actual, physical Tyrant was also a booze-related idea. The journal was a drunken idea that made it from the back of a dark bar at four in the morning and out into the world. When an idea breaks through and actually pans out wide, it feels tremendously sweet (you know that whole thing about "Between thought and expression lies an angry giant trying to stop your dreams"). The magazine began with some like-minded friends, kind of on a whim, to do something that we would enjoy doing. I was bored with the current "lit scene" and felt embarrassed for my generation. I didn't want to be remembered for living in a time when only the most totally fucking *weak* lit journals reigned. So I suppose I wanted to change that. Apart from Open City, there was nothing else worthy of anyone's respect. I'd like

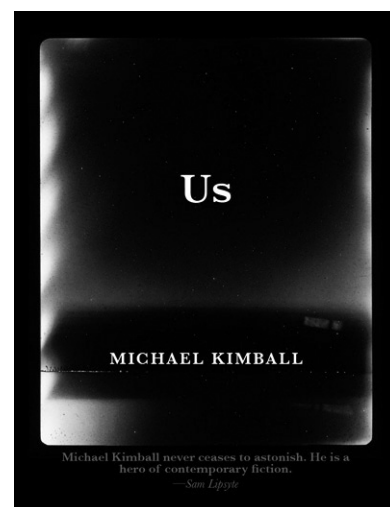
to make it clear that I did not start publishing books out of "deep passion." I have never had a deep passion for anything. Except perhaps for drugs and for sex and for drinking and for having sex while doing drugs and drinking. There's really nothing quite like the Faulknerian dirtycokesex.

The politics between those of us involved in the Tyrant's beginning quickly became unfun. There began an intimacy between me and one of my partners and I...I just felt utterly compelled to prove to everyone once and for all that making out with your business partner amidst the remains of a drug party at the Chelsea Hotel is never a good idea. This night was a huge sacrifice on my part, but that's why I'm here: to give. From out of this desire was born a schism, but it wasn't really a schism since all of the money is mine. It was more of a pullout of the all of the others who'd less, or nothing, to lose. When you go into business with someone who has invested only time, and not money, then when things don't go as swimmingly as planned, there is little to keep them from getting up from the table and walking away. Other people have come and gone since then, but they have almost all gone away on weirdish, uncomfortable terms. The Tyrant, the very name of the venture, has affected many relationships. (I'm the only one still here from the very beginning, and I will certainly be here until the end.) Luke Goebel works with me now, and I couldn't be happier with this particular partnership. Luke has a real appetite, and that's almost impossible to come by. As good as a dynamic can possibly be between two people, a strong dynamic can turn bad, and fights are likely to ensue. Hopefully it bounces back. Luke and I have our differences, to be sure, but that's good. I'm pretty sure we have both threatened each other's lives once or twice. This keeps a tighter ship, and you really have to click with someone on a level of strong love if you want your mutual dream to ever work. I think the fewer editors a magazine has, the better the magazine will be. The vision of any magazine seems to become jumbled when different opinions mix together. It's like, would you want to hear a mix tape made by ten people? I probably wouldn't. Every mix tape anyone has made for me has never been perfect.

I forget which came first, the name or the idea.

When you create a thing with a name like *tyrant*, you definitely risk creating a hostile environment. I think a lot about *nomen est omen* (name is destiny). Most aphorisms plucked from Latin make a lot sense to me. The world and life aren't spelled out for us, but at least words are. The naming of something will have its repercussions, much like the title of a book creates the mood of a book. Am I a tyrannical asshole to work with? Maybe. I don't think I am too hard to work with though. On the contrary, I think I am initially too easy to work with and have a bad habit of letting people walk all over me. But then, eventually, I'm like, "Wait, what are you doing? Stop walking all over me." I am very kind, and then I am very mean. Then I am kind again, I think.

So we started with the magazine and then started doing novels through Tyrant Books. I knew nothing about the business when I started and I still don't know very much. But people seem to like it. It's really flattering because I always wonder what could happen if I actually tried. But maybe it turns out good because I don't try very hard. This statement is truer than it seems.



Current release

### How would you characterize the fiction you publish?

I don't know. The most approachable term might be *literary*—which just may mean that there is any style at all to the writing within. Our writers are very different from one another. The only way that they are alike, as far as I can tell, is that all of our writers please Luke and I a great deal. There isn't much more to it than, "Hey, here are some great pieces that we like. Will you like them too, please, or at least give them a shot?" We like these stories, so we put them together in one book.

### Who is your audience, and in what ways are you trying to reach them?

I heard Gary Lutz call someone a writer's writer's writer. As much as I hate to blatantly steal from anyone, I guess you could say that the Tyrant is almost a lit-mag's lit-mag's lit mag. This can either mean that I think the Tyrant is very special, or it can mean that the Tyrant sells fewer copies than the larger, more established, and better-funded magazines. There's nothing so special about the Tyrant or anything that makes it any different than other magazines. It really boils down to presenting an honest and personal taste and the hoping that others nod at what you show them.

### What is your role in the publishing scene?

I'm unsure if I have one. Seems like there is an audience for what I do, but it isn't for everyone. It's so "not for everyone" that it is almost for no one. Readers who have enjoyed what we have put out will probably continue to enjoy what we do. It's like, very few people are into eating dirt, but you know that there are some out there who are very into eating dirt.

### What's in the future for Tyrant Books?

More magazines, more books. I have very strange visions of VHS tapes with TYRANT PORN written on them. I'd love to make some bear/chub/daddy porn one day. That would be great, but I know nothing about film. We do have a book of illustrations coming out from Atticus Lish. It will be out this summer, if all goes as planned. And we have books by Sam Michel, Blake Butler, Scott McClanahan, and Ken Baumann coming out in the fall and following spring. That's about it for now. It's enough, right?